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ABSTRACT

School-reform efforts have forced administrators and board members to pay increasing attention to school-community relationships. This paper presents findings of a study conducted during 1993-94 that examined public-relations practices in 168 school districts in 4 midwestern states. A survey of 200 superintendents in Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, and Wisconsin elicited 168 replies, an 84 percent response rate. Findings show that many school districts were doing little in the public-relations arena. Nearly one-half of the districts (42 percent) did not have a plan or policy directing public-relations activities and about 20 percent had not designated a person responsible for public relations. The most widely used public-relations technique was the issue of news releases. Few superintendents viewed their public-relations role as more than providing information to the public. Respondents identified funding and time allocation as the greatest barriers to program implementation. One-way, sporadic communication designed to influence public opinion continued to be the norm, and public-relations success was usually evaluated in terms of gains in public support. Twenty-one tables are included. (Contains 13 references.) (LMI)

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PRACTICE IN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS:

A STUDY OF SUPERINTENDENTS IN FOUR MIDWESTERN STATES

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Abstract

In this Information Age, public relations has taken on new meanings. There is a growing importance placed on accessing information to identify and solve problems in relation to making public relations an integral part of school administration. School reform efforts have caused administrators and board members to pay increasing attention to school-community relationships. Data are presented from a 1993-94 study of public relations practices in 168 school districts in four midwest states. Superintendents from these 168 school districts provided information that serves as evidence of current practices in their districts including the status of public relations; the structure and scope of public relations programs; identification of public relations problems, successes, and the greatest needs for public relations program improvement; and intentions for future modification of public relations efforts. Concerns are shared relating to a lack of policy to integrate technology and provide information for improving public relations. Recommendations are offered for structuring and improving public relations programs.

Introduction

Since the early 1970s, schools, colleges, and universities have faced two stark realities: major transformations in American society and an increasingly negative perception of educational institutions. Societal transformation, as Toffler (1970) noted in his insightful book, *Fuure Shock*, warned in the early 1970s that the future would be very different and would require significant social and economic adaptations. A decade later, futurist John Naisbitt (1982) identified ten trends he believed were reshaping American society; three of which were particularly cogent with education:

- movement from an industrial society to an information society,
- movement from a national economy to a global economy, and
- movement from hierarchies to networking.

Each has influenced structure and behavior in most educational organizations and collectively have been instrumental in changes in the use of information and the development of communication systems.

Progressive scrutiny of elementary and secondary schools since the 1950s has produced increasingly negative perceptions of educational institutions. Recent efforts and demands for restructuring have created an atmosphere of reform wherein educational leaders are expected to regain the public's confidence and recreate strong relationships that once existed between schools and communities.

New Meanings for Public Relations in an Information Age

Public relations is a social science and an art. It has many definitions, connotations, and themes and is used at various times to describe a concept, a profession, a process, and even a goal depending on the context in which the term is used. The missions and objectives of large businesses are distinctly different from those of public school districts and the utilization of public relations by each serves different purposes. Businesses use public relations to improve company image for the purpose of increasing profit. In contrast, educational administrators use public relations to provide essential information to assist with instructional decisions because schools exist to provide a critical societal service.

Narrowly defined, public relations is perceived to involve press agentry or advertising for the purpose of preparing and disseminating information to the public through purchased means (e.g., paid ads on television or newspaper). Intent has often served as the basis for defining public relations especially when public sentiment is considered. Dilenschneider and Forrestal (1987) briefly defined public relations as "...the use of information to influence public opinion" (p. 5). Over time, there has been an increasing emphasis placed on two-way communication between an organization and its *ecosystems* which are described as the networks of social relationships in which an organization is embedded (McElreath, 1993). This emphasis on interacting with the general environment serves to enable organizations to know consumer wants and needs and in effect makes them more effective through the use of open communication systems.

In this information age era, it is not only undesirable but is virtually impossible to insulate corporations (businesses and schools) because governmental agencies, pressure groups, and influential individuals often have the power and ability to gain information and impose their will. Therefore, interactive communication systems that feature two-way communication and create amicable relationships between organizations and their ecosystems are sought by administrators. In contemporary society, social responsibility and communication have become essential "costs" of doing business for virtually all organizations (Newsom, Scott & VanSlyke Turk, 1989). In fact, organizational stability and longevity are dependent on the presence of positive internal and external relationships (Seitel, 1992).

Other definitions of public relations include elements of leadership enlightenment, propaganda or persuasion, trend analysis, and planned programs of action--each of which are at the very heart of organizational administration and leadership decision making. Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1992) suggested that students and practitioners focus on recurring key words to enhance their understanding of public relations because the hundreds of existing definitions created general confusion. The six terms they identified are deliberate, planned, performance, public interest, two-way communication, and management function.

Melvin Sharpe proposed a comprehensive approach to public relations which entails the linkage of process to desired outcomes. Seitel (1992) indicated Sharpe's approach was especially effective because he cited outcomes

that are congruent with theoretical and actual expectations established for social institutions such as schools. The desired outcomes of credibility, confidence, reciprocity and good will, avoided alienation, and social harmony are achieved through the processes of honest communication, openness and consistency of actions, fairness of actions, continuous two-way communication, and environmental research and evaluation (Seitel, 1992, p. 10).

Definitions of Public Relations in Education

Educators have historically used the terms "community relations" and "public relations" synonymously. While public relations is a process designed to build desirable school-community relations, educators have been reluctant to admit they were engaging in public relations activities. This reluctance is based on a perceived fear that taxpayers (stakeholders) would view them as using approaches akin to Madison Avenue persuasion techniques (West, 1985).

Definitions developed with specificity to educational organizations range in focus and length just like the general definitions of public relations. Various definitions include key terms such as persuasion, information exchanges, and two-way communication of ideas between community and school. Public relations includes how individuals feel about issues, services, and individual or organizational personalities. One of the most comprehensive definitions of public relations in education, formulated by West (1985), incorporated the concepts of human relations and the use of multiple media. These ingredients, in today's information society, have special importance. Through the use of available technology, greater opportunities than ever before exist for improved communication.

The call for school reform has been instrumental in renewing an emphasis on school-community relations. Administrators have been forced to develop more effective channels of communication with their constituents because of the decline in the public's confidence in schools and the fact that the publics are not well informed. To cope with an unstable social environment that is increasingly more dynamic and less predictable, administrators have had to place added effort on building sound and constructive relationships between schools and their ecosystems. The interrelationships between schools and their ecosystems is evolutionary because neither schools or communities

remain constant.

Nine potential recurring functions of public relations in a public school district have been identified in popular definitions. These functions include goodwill, external information, internal information, image promotion, service promotion, interpretation, persuasion, interaction, and reaction.

Public relations in educational institutions for the purpose of this paper is defined as: *an evolving social science and management process that utilizes multi-media approaches and is designed to build goodwill, enhance the public's attitude toward the value of education, augment interaction and two-way communication between schools and their ecosystems, provide vital and useful information to the public and employees, and serve as an integral part of the planning and decision-making functions* (Kowalski, 1995).

An Increasing Need for Public Relations

Administrators realize that their school organizations desperately need effective public relations programs in place now, at a time when resources are restricted and the public's scrutiny of and lack of confidence in education is at its peak. Not only must administrators be able to understand public relations and its many facets but they must also be able to inform and enlist the support of the general public.

The immediacy of this need is underscored by the continued overall erosion of public confidence in schools. This lack of confidence spans several decades and evolved from such issues as growing skepticism about the effectiveness of elementary and secondary education in the 1950s--and more recently about higher education; in the 1960s with the turmoil of political consequences of Sputnik and subsequent social unrest following the Civil Rights Law, Viet Nam War, and teacher unionism; in the 1970s with a public cry for a return to the "basics" and more emphasis on core skills with a more limited amount of time spent on social issues; which led to the early 1980s overall public disenchantment with public education which grew into a full-blown movement to reform public education. These changes over the last 30 years in the social, political, legal, and economic frameworks of American society have modified the mission and image of schools. A result has been the creation of an environment in which comprehensive public relations programs have become essential.

There are many contemporary conditions that have intensified the need for effective public relations programs. These include growing public criticism, existence of the information age, a pluralistic culture, movement toward school decentralization, emphasis placed on lifelong learning, the need for political and economic support, and the condition of expanding demands with shrinking pools of resources (Kowalski, 1995). Other conditions include expanded options, acceleration of change, presence of a global economy, existing social and economic conditions, inadequate funding, and philosophical ambiguity. Each of these conditions has definite ramifications on the health and overall well-being of public education.

Few will argue that public education is viewed by many as an unproductive drain on public resources rather than being held in high esteem, as once was the case. What are perceived to be the ills of education are not necessarily factually based; rather, the negative perceptions are often left unchallenged by educators which reinforces the views of critics.

The most compelling arguments for educational public relations are related to the following conditions:

- Misinformation continues to play a critical role in perpetuating myths about education and educational outcomes.
- The American public continues to debate the specific purposes of schools - especially with regard to competing goals such as excellence and equity.
- Many schools remain bureaucratic-like entities resistant to change.
- Nearly 30 years of change and criticism have engendered myths that erode the public's goodwill, understanding, and support for education. The myths must be addressed and the public's confidence must be restored.
- Expectations for social institutions have changed due to the availability of information via technology. Technology permits a more comprehensive approach to public relations.

Collectively, these conditions illuminate the ascending importance of educational public relations.

The Role of Technology

In the information society in which schools today exist, the importance of technology can not be overemphasized. Integration of technology in public relations activities improves access to information, changes the value placed on information, and heightens the level of interaction between schools and their respective communities (e.g., Lipinski, 1978). Technology can provide the tools for increasing public relations programs and their efficiency. Ultimately, through the use of technology, it is anticipated that social institutions will be more interactive, responsive, and effective. A delicate balance must be reached when using technology to not totally sacrifice human interaction for the sake of efficiency.

West (1985) suggested a set of communication principles that involve technology and educational public relations. These principles include immediacy - instant communication, ubiquity - pervasive communication, selectivity - user controlled, interactiveness - two-way communication, imagery - overall character of a message, and change - using communication to alter ideas, beliefs, and values (West, 1985, pp. 47-48). West predicted that educators employing these principles would move beyond reinforcing positive views to establishing communication links that would focus on changing public perceptions.

Technological tools available to educators in this information age include microcomputers, word processors, cable television, interactive television, and other electronic devices that provide a wealth of opportunities for use in the improvement of the quantity and quality of information exchanged between communities and schools. These tools make interchanges between schools and their communities more timely, concise, and responsive to the needs of communities and their ecosystems. These technological tools have broadened the scope and effectiveness of public relations activities for administrators and have done so without unduly taxing the resources of the organization. Some of the practical administrative uses of technology include tracking issues, connecting schools and members of an administrative team electronically through a computer network, processing survey data, personalizing and speeding up the processing of news releases and mailing lists, handling of correspondence, and saving time and money preparing publications, contracts, and other documents. Technological tools increase opportunities to involve community members in more school projects and to heighten their awareness of what students and schools

are doing.

Effectiveness of these technological tools is dependent upon the planning and execution of the program. Despite new technologies, new opportunities to access and use information, and new needs to build symbiotic relationships between schools and communities, there is no simple recipe that administrators can follow. The mere use of technology tools will not guarantee success of public relations activities; rather, it only stands to enhance and broaden the impact of the activities designed for organizational improvement. The movement into the information age coupled with the mounting demands for school reform have placed a higher premium on communication which has become increasingly more sensitive and complex. For these reasons, the study of public relations has become critical to practicing and aspiring school administrators.

Effective school administration requires administrators to establish open communication systems through a comprehensive approach that produces accurate and timely information. Microcomputers have revolutionized how school administrators prepare copy for publications (newsletters, staff directories, brochures, school calendars, annual reports, contracts, etc.) a traditionally labor intensive and very expensive process. By using microcomputers with word processing, the convenience coupled with reduced time and labor could reduce the costs by as much as 70 percent (Bagin, Ferguson, & Marx 1985). Microcomputers are valuable tools for administrators to work through negotiations in the preparation of contract language and individualized employee contracts wherein the ultimate savings are in decreasing the chances of costs of errors.

Telecommunications provide opportunities for communicators to provide timely information, distributed in the best and fastest way possible. Several national groups have set up electronic information services that may be accessed through microcomputers and telephone lines making information available on a wide range of information that directly impacts education. Electronic networks are used to also distribute important, timely information to member schools and subscribers enabling public relations personnel to develop newsletters, post bulletin board notices, or route them to designated personnel. Instant communications through computer networks allows for instant exchange of ideas and information. These networks can also be used to send data for press conferences, board meetings, etc. to a wide audience simultaneously without having to be interrupted with a busy signal which may

occur with standard telephone transmissions.

Cable television is a major source of public information in a growing number of communities. Public access channels provide opportunities to disseminate information into thousands of homes for many schools and public institutions. School cable channels may be used as a source of news and information, interviews, school board meetings, school activities, and to promote upcoming school programs and activities. Cable channels can now be turned into interactive systems through technology.

Other technological advances that enable administrators to broaden their public relations approaches include teleconferencing, instructional television fixed service microwave systems, satellite television (two-way audio and two-way video), videotapes, videodiscs, interactive communication, faxes, and modems to only mention a few. Because communication is at the core of public relations, and because information has become so essential to leadership, leadership is dependent on the comprehensive application of public relations.

A Study of Public Relations in Four Midwestern States

During the 1993-94 academic year, a study of school superintendents was conducted in four midwestern states to determine what public relations practices were being utilized. The purpose of the study was to broaden the knowledge base of school public relations practices.

Questionnaire and Respondents

Fifty superintendents in each of the four states of Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, and Wisconsin were sent questionnaires. The four state departments of education provided directories that were used to identify a random selection. The sample was not stratified by district size, location within the state, or any other criteria. There was no attempt to stratify the sample according to district size, location within the state, etc. A total of 168 completed questionnaires were returned constituting an 84 percent return rate. The questions regarded demographic information, programming for school community relations, goals of a public relations program, public relations program successes, and problems encountered in public relations.

Procedure

The 28-item questionnaire (25 fixed response and three open-ended questions) focused on public relations programming issues and demographic information. For all of the variables, means, standard deviations, and percentages were calculated. Six demographic variables were included in the survey. Four pertained to the school districts in which superintendents were employed (the state in which the district was located, a description of the community in which the school district was located, the frequency of school board meetings, and the total pupil enrollment of the district). Two pertained to the superintendents themselves. Tables one to four include the outcomes for these questions.

Table 1
Distribution of Participating School Districts by States

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	State Return Rate	Percent of All Responses
State	Illinois	37	74%	22.0%
	Indiana	48	98%	28.6%
	Minnesota	41	82%	24.4%
	Wisconsin	42	84%	25.0%
	Total	168	84%	100.0%

Table 2
Distribution of Participating School Districts by Description of Community Setting

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Community	Small City/Town	59	35.1%
	Rural	39	23.2%
	Suburban	48	28.6%
	Urban	19	11.3%
	No Response	3	1.8%
	Total	168	100.0%

Table 3
Size of School Districts

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
District	<1,500	44	26.2%
	1,500-3,999	61	36.3%
	4,000-6,999	22	13.1%
	7,000>	41	24.4%
	Total	168	100.0%

Table 4
Average Number of School Board Meetings Per Month

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Frequency of Meetings	1 per month	73	43.5%
	2 per month	83	49.3%
	3 per month	4	2.4%
	>3 per month	6	3.6%
	No response	2	1.2%
	Total	168	100.0%

Most school systems in these four states have enrollments of fewer than 4,000 students; therefore, there was a high number of small districts that were in this study. The districts randomly selected for participation in the study also had a majority of small city or rural districts - which is also representative of these states.

Doctoral degrees were held by more than half (57%) of the responding superintendents. Glass (1992) found that just over one-third (46%) of all superintendents in a national study had doctoral degrees; therefore, the superintendents in this study represented a higher than national average of superintendents with doctoral degrees. Slightly more than one half (51%) of the superintendents had four or fewer years while one out of five had ten or more years experience in the positions they held.

School District Public Relations Programs

Public relations programs are not limited to the distribution of information and promotional activities. This broad administrative function also includes the collection and analysis of needs assessment data; however, efforts designed to keep the general public informed are the most commonly cited components of public relations programs. Eight items in the questionnaire either directly or indirectly related to the current level of programming.

Public Relations Plans and Policy

The presence of a written school board policy and plan for program implementation are indications of whether the public relations process is an integral aspect of the overall management of schools. The superintendents were asked if either a written plan or policy or both were in existence in their districts. Table 5 contains the results.

Table 5
Presence of a Written Plan or Policy for Public Relations

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Plan or Policy for Public Relations	Yes, a Plan	26	15.4%
	Yes, a Policy	46	27.4%
	Yes, Both	25	14.9%
	No	70	41.7%
	No Response	1	0.6%
	Total	168	100.0%

Neither a plan nor a policy were mentioned by nearly 42% of the superintendents. These data indicate that public relations is approached informally by nearly half of the districts.

In the event of an emergency or crisis, the superintendents were also asked if they had a plan and/or policy outlining how communications with the media would be handled. Table 6 contains the results for this item.

Table 6
Presence of a Written Plan or Policy for Communicating with the Media in the Event of an Emergency Crisis

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Plan or Policy for Emergency/ Crisis	Yes, a Plan	59	35.1%
	Yes, a Policy	29	17.3%
	Yes, Both	23	13.7%
	No	53	31.5%
	No Response	4	2.4%
	Total	168	100.0%

Nearly one-third of the superintendents in Indiana (35%), Minnesota (32%), and Wisconsin (30%) reported having neither a plan nor policy; yet only 16% of those in Illinois reported the same condition. Conversely, a significantly higher percent of superintendents in Illinois (41%) reported having both a plan and policy for this

purpose, whereas only 23% in Wisconsin, 17% in Indiana, and 12% in Minnesota reported the same condition.

Public Relations Responsibility

Staff members responsible for public relations were identified by the superintendents. Table 7 reports the choices and results. About one in five reported no one was responsible for the public relations program and only a very few districts reported employing the services of an outside consultant.

Table 7
Responsibility for the Public Relations Function

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Who is Responsible	Superintendent	51	30.4%
	Another Administrator	75	44.6%
	Consultant	5	3.0%
	No One	35	20.8%
	No Response	2	1.2%
	Total	168	100.0%

Compared to smaller districts, districts over 7,000 students were slightly more apt to have individuals of the administrative staff assigned the responsibility of public relations functions. Comparisons across the four enrollment groups, based on school enrollments, were not statistically significant (see Table 3).

Dissemination of Information

Distribution of information items was the subject of several survey questions. The first pertained to newsletters and the results are found in Table 8. Slightly more than one-fourth of the districts published monthly newsletters and nearly 20% of the superintendents did not respond to this item. There were no significant variations across the four states nor did school district enrollment appear to be a factor affecting this item.

Table 8
Frequency of Producing Community Newsletters

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Frequency of Production	Monthly	46	27.4%
	Semi-Annually	46	27.4%
	Annually	18	10.7%
	Never	25	14.9%
	No Response	33	19.6%
	Total	168	100.0%

In this information age, there is a great deal of speculation that organizations that are moving away from print material when communicating with patrons. Regularly scheduled radio or television programs is another means for communicating with the general public. Nearly three out of four school districts had neither a regularly scheduled radio program or television program. Larger school systems (i.e. those over 7,000 enrollment) were a little more likely to have such programs. Complete results for this item are found in Table 9.

Table 9
Regularly Scheduled Information Radio and Television Programs

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Regular Radio and/or TV Programs	Yes, Radio	16	9.5%
	Yes, Television	16	9.5%
	Yes, Both	11	6.6%
	No	124	73.8%
	No Response	1	0.6%
	Total	168	100.0%

The superintendents were also asked how often they had prepared news releases over the past three years. The response choices and results are contained in Table 10.

Table 10
Frequency of News Releases

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Frequency of News Releases	Frequently	89	53.0%
	Occasionally	56	33.3%
	Rarely	20	11.9%
	Never	2	1.2%
	No Response	1	0.6%
	Total	168	100.0%

Clearly, many school districts rely on news releases to distribute information. Only two districts in the sample reported having never used news releases.

The production of brochures, pamphlets, and/or other related materials during the past three years was the next information-related item. Materials of this sort are often produced and distributed to inform present and potential patrons. Table 11 presents the results for this item.

Table 11
Preparation of Promotional Pamphlets/Brochures for Current and Potential Patrons Over the Last Three Years

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Degree in which Print Materials were Prepared	Extensively	48	28.6%
	Moderately	77	45.8%
	Very Limited	36	21.4%
	Not at All	7	4.2%
	Total	168	100.0%

With respect to this question, district enrollment made somewhat of a difference. Of the seven superintendents reporting never preparing such materials, six came from districts with enrollments below 1,500 and the remaining one came from a district with an enrollment between 1,500 and 3,999.

The extent to which school district officials over the past three years had prepared visual materials describing school programs for school patrons was the last information-related item. The least likely school districts to produce visual materials or to produce them as frequently as larger districts were the school districts in the smallest enrollment category, i.e., those below 1,500 students. Table 12 contains the response options and results.

Table 12
Preparation of Visual Promotional Materials for Current and Potential Patrons over the Last Three Years

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Degree to which Visual Materials were Prepared	Extensively	13	7.7%
	Moderately	46	27.4%
	Very Limited	58	34.5%
	Not at All	50	29.8%
	No Response	1	0.6%
	Total	168	100.0%

Relationship with the Community and Media

The average number of school board meetings held was fairly evenly divided between one meeting per month (44%) and two meetings per month (49%). The vast majority (93%) of the superintendents reported the relationship of their districts with the community at-large as being excellent or good. More than 93% of the superintendents also reported their personal relationships with the local media were excellent or good. The local

media's treatment of the school district was deemed to be excellent by nearly one out of three of the respondents (32%) and excellent treatment of the superintendent was reported by more than one out of three repondents (35%). Outcomes for these items are reported in Tables 13 and 14.

Table 13
Local Media's Treatment of School District

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Excellent	54	32.1%
Good	88	52.4%
Fair	20	11.9%
Poor	5	3.0%
No Response	1	0.6%
Total	168	100.0%

Table 14
Local Media's Treatment of Superintendent

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Excellent	59	35.1%
Good	87	51.8%
Fair	17	10.1%
Poor	2	1.2%
No Response	3	1.8%
Total	168	100.0%

The superintendents were asked if their school board members communicated directly with the media. Nearly three out of four (70%) said they did not while nearly one out of four (23%) indicated that occasionally they did communicate directly with the media. The response options and results are presented in Table 15.

Table 15
School Board Members Communicate Directly with Media

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Yes, Frequently	1	0.6%
Yes, Occasionally	39	23.2%
No	117	69.6%
Uncertain	9	5.4%
No Response	2	1.2%
Total	168	100.0%

Another issue that the media often becomes involved in is employee collective bargaining. The superintendents were asked if there were media-related problems due to collective bargaining activities. A large majority (71%) did not believe there were problems; however, one out of four (25%) said that media-related problems did exist. The results are reported in Table 16.

Table 16
Media-Related Problems Due to Employee Collective Bargaining

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Definitely	7	4.2%
Somewhat	33	19.6%
No	119	70.8%
Uncertain	7	4.2%
No Response	2	1.2%
Total	168	100.0%

There was only a small number of the superintendents who believed that collective bargaining had definitely been a cause for poor media relations in their communities.

Contemporary Issues

With a changing society and integration of technology in everyone's lives, the superintendents were asked if they thought that demographic changes were requiring increased attention be placed on public relations efforts. A large majority (93%) indicated that societal changes had direct influence. As well, the superintendents reported that greater attention must be placed on public relations because society is becoming significantly more information based. The outcomes and response options for these two items are reported in Tables 17 and 18.

Table 17
Increased Public Relations Attention Due to Demographic Changes

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Definitely	100	59.5%
Somewhat	55	32.7%
No	9	5.4%
Uncertain	3	1.8%
No Response	1	0.6%
Total	168	100.0%

Table 18
Increased Public Relations Attention Due to Information-Based Society

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Definitely	104	61.9%
Somewhat	59	35.1%
No	4	2.4%
Uncertain	0	0.0%
No Response	1	0.6%
Total	168	100.0%

The results of these two items further emphasize that societal needs and conditions often serve to drive school district public relations efforts and that it is important for superintendents to be aware of current conditions and trends.

The superintendents were asked if technology had changed the way their districts approached public relations. More than one out of three (35%) responded that technology had definite impact while slightly less than one half (48%) indicated that technology had some impact. Table 19 reports the results.

Table 19
Public Relations Approaches Changed by Technology

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Definitely	59	35.1%
Somewhat	80	47.6%
No	27	16.1%
Uncertain	1	0.6%
No Response	1	0.6%
Total	168	100.0%

The issue of funding public relations programs is often one of concern and debate by school districts. The superintendents were asked if funding for public relations should be a priority for public schools. More than three out of four superintendents (76%) reported that funding should be a priority. The results and response options are reported in Table 20.

Table 20

~~Public Relations Approaches Changed by Technology~~ Funding for Public Relations Should be a Priority

Category	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Definitely	66	39.3%
Somewhat	62	36.9%
No	25	14.9%
Uncertain	12	7.1%
No Response	3	1.8%
Total	168	100.0%

Program Plans

Plans to expand public relations efforts were explored with the superintendents. Slightly less than one out of three expressed definite intentions in this regard. School districts in the smallest enrollment category, those below 1,500 students, were the least likely to have future plans to expand programming. Only slight variations were found among the other three enrollment categories. Table 21 reports the results.

Table 21
Plans to Expand Public Relations Efforts in the Future

Category	Response Options	Number of Responses	Percent of All Responses
Expansion of PR Efforts	Definitely Plan to Expand	49	29.2%
	Somewhat Plan to Expand	73	43.5%
	No Plan to Expand	28	16.6%
	Uncertain	17	10.1%
	No Response	1	0.6%
	Total	168	100.0%

Summary

The purpose of this study was to generate information that would broaden the information base related to school district public relations initiatives.

In general, the results of this study indicate considerable variations exist among school districts in four midwestern states with regard to using public relations. Consider these research outcomes:

- Nearly one half of the districts (42%) did not have a plan or policy directing public relations activities.
- Over one-third of the districts (36%) had no plan or policy regarding communicating with the media in the event of an emergency or crisis.
- Approximately 20% of the districts had no one--not even the superintendent--designated as being responsible for public relations.
- About 15% of the districts never published a newsletter, and another 38% did so only once or twice a year.
- Only about one-fourth of the districts had a regularly scheduled television or radio programs.
- Only about one-fourth of the districts reported extensive efforts with regard to preparing printed promotional materials (pamphlets, brochures), and only 8% reported extensive efforts in preparing visual promotional materials (video tapes).
- The most widely used public relations technique identified in the study was the issuance of news releases.
- Most superintendents viewed the goals of their public relations activities to inform the public. Few gave the process a broader value.

Successes from public relations activities were usually associated with gaining public support (e.g., in referenda). Only a handful of superintendents identified planning and improved communication as successes. Despite these indications that many school districts are doing little in the public relations arena, superintendent projections for the future are only somewhat promising.

Funding and time allocation were seen as the greatest barriers to program implementation. Few superintendents identified problems associated with defining public relations too narrowly. As well, funding and additional staff were identified as the greatest needs with regard to public relations programming. Again, few identified a more effective use of information or a greater sensitivity to the needs and wants of their clientele.

The nature of activities reported suggested a disjuncture between ideal and real practices. One-way, sporadic

communication designed to influence public opinion continues to be the norm. Although programming continues to be limited, the effects of reform, technology, and the information age are becoming apparent. Over 70% of the superintendents indicated some intention to expand programming. School districts will receive increasing levels of pressure to improve communication functions; however, without appropriately defining and integrating public relations, resources could be wasted to bolster ineffective practices.

There are continuing public relations problems. Public relations has historically been treated as a one-way communication function (i.e., school districts giving information to the community). As well, public relations has been used largely to influence public opinion or to gain public support for referenda. One must remember that one-way communication does not eradicate misinformation and myths about schools and schooling.

Superintendents must become more aware of the need to develop two-way communication with the many publics served and recognize that until communication is vastly improved, a narrow perspective of public relations by the mass public will result and the public relations process will receive low priority. In light of current criticism of American education in national media, one would think that public school officials would have developed sophisiticated programs of public relations to counter their critics. But this is not the case, at least in the four states studied.

This study warrants special attention by state school board and school administrator association executives. Each should consider a study to determine the extent of organized communication programs (media relations, crisis plans, newsletters, recognition efforts, use of volunteers and advisory committees, etc.) in the state (Kowalski & Wiedmer, 1995). Results may indicate the need and receptivity for training and development workshops for district officials.

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